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Seven U46 students to participate in Illinois Special Olympics Summer Games

BY RAFAEL GUERRERO

Seven swimmers and track-and-field athletes from School District U46 will participate in this weekend's Illinois [Special Olympics](#) Summer Games, district officials announced.

The students qualified for the competition by earning first place in their regional competitions for their sport. They'll be among 4,000 athletes competing in the state contests being held Friday through Sunday at [Illinois State University](#) and the Bloomington-Normal area, a news release from the district said.

"It's a great opportunity to celebrate the success of our students. It's a coveted honor to participate in the Summer Games, so this is very exciting," said Sarah Domin, a U46 physical therapist who is a bowling, basketball, and track and field coach for the district and its Special Olympics athletes.

Student-athletes representing U46 are:

- Jeremy Johnson, Streamwood High School, 50-meter run.
- Ozzy Hernandez, Center House Transition Program, 100-meter breaststroke and 100-meter freestyle.
- Constantina "Tina" Hondros, Canton Middle School, 25-meter freestyle and 50-meter freestyle.
- Vincent "Vinny" Leal, Kenyon Woods Middle School, 100-meter run.
- James Leveille, Horizon Elementary School, 100-meter run.
- [Jackson](#) Miller, Larkin High School, 200-meter run.
- Syed Raza, Bartlett High School, 200-meter run

"Jeremy almost lost both of his legs, so for him to want to participate in walking or running events is pretty cool," his mother, Cheryl Johnson, said in the district's news release.

Her son has Down Syndrome and has required the use of braces, casts, walkers and wheelchairs to overcome orthopedic issues over the years, she said.

"If we're shopping in a store, he might say he's in pain," Cheryl Johnson said in the release. "But when the race starts in Special Olympics, you wouldn't know he's had any issues."

According to Illinois Special Olympics, more than 11,000 people attend the Summer Games annually.

SPORTS SECTION

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'Unbelievable': Elgin graduate Courtese Cooper signs with LSU for men's basketball after winning national title at Triton

BY BOB NARANG

Courtese Cooper's journey has taken another big turn.

The Elgin graduate officially signed on May 31 to play basketball at [LSU](#).

Only two years ago, Cooper was a fringe prospect at the start of his senior season at Elgin. He weighed interest from numerous [NCAA](#) Division II and III schools, including Benedictine, before choosing to play for Triton.

But Cooper averaged 10.1 points, 6.8 rebounds and 2.9 blocked shots this season, helping Triton win its first NJCAA Division II championship in March.

As a result, the 6-foot-9, 205-pound forward became an in-demand recruit. He picked LSU over [Arkansas](#), New Mexico State, Nebraska and Northern Illinois.

Cooper acknowledged being bewildered over his recruitment, especially since he didn't start playing organized basketball until his freshman year at Elgin.

"It's been unbelievable," Cooper said. "The amount of change in the last few years is amazing. Coming out of Elgin, I had a lot of Division II and Division III schools interested. But to be going to LSU is just insane.

"I started playing basketball so late, and look how far I've come. LSU is a great school and a great opportunity, and I'm just soaking it all in."

Besides fulfilling his dream of playing in the SEC, Cooper said he was intrigued by the plan designed by the LSU coaching staff for his long-range development. Cooper has three years of eligibility remaining.



Elgin's Courtese Cooper works the ball into the lane against St. Charles North during a game on Friday, Feb. 3, 2017. (Tim Carroll / The Courier-News)

"They want me to work on my ballhandling, finishing around the basket and being more explosive," he said. "They have a really great strength and conditioning program at LSU."

"I've always wanted to put on weight because I'm skinny for my position. After one summer, they think I can put on at least 20 pounds. They have all the resources to help me do that. I'm really looking forward to getting to work, and I can't wait to see what they can transform my game into."

Elgin coach Mike Sitter pointed out Cooper's game should evolve at LSU.

"(Courtese) has tremendous touch from the outside up to 25 feet from the rim," he said. "That shooting skill will come in handy (at LSU). He may no longer be the tallest player on the court and will have to move to the perimeter."

"He has great potential. He was always the first one on the court for practice and the last one to leave."

Triton coach Steve Christiansen said Cooper is just scratching the surface of his abilities.

"I've always felt that Courtese's trajectory is very high," he said. "His game will continue to grow. He always has worked hard. I'm happy for him to reach his dream of playing for a Power Five conference."

Bob Narang is a freelance reporter for The Courier-News.